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UNCLAS SAN JOSE 002215

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR WHA/CEN MELISSA KOPOLOW

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TAGS: [ELAB](#) [ETRD](#) [CS](#)

SUBJECT: STUDENTS, LABOR UNIONS STAGE ANTI-CAFTA MARCHES

REF: A. SAN JOSE 944

[B](#). SAN JOSE 2181

[C](#). SAN JOSE 1153

[1](#)1. Summary: Labor unions and student groups took to the streets of San Jose on Tuesday, September 20, to protest the U.S.-Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR), as President Pacheco's "Commission of Eminent Persons" made the findings of its study on the agreement public. While no official numbers have been released, Embassy contacts indicated approximately 1,500 people participated in the combined protests. Both groups joined in mid-march, but separated again when the labor marchers insisted on proceeding to the Presidential House, while the students opted to remain in a busy, high visibility traffic circle. A smaller group of students returned in the evening intent on disrupting traffic; in doing so, this small group of about 60 made the biggest tangible impact on the city. While these marches were likely only the first of many anticipated over coming months, the relatively small turnout and obvious divisions among the protesters combined with continued public support for CAFTA-DR may indicate that Pacheco's fears of a national shutdown may be unjustified. End summary.

UNITED IN PURPOSE, DIVIDED IN PLAN

[1](#)2. Ever since Costa Rica signed CAFTA-DR, labor leaders have promised widespread strikes should President Pacheco present the agreement to the Legislative Assembly for ratification. Union leaders upped the ante in April, promising widespread civil disobedience and stating that they would not recognize the February 2006 general elections if pro-CAFTA-DR candidate Oscar Arias won (Ref A). More recently, student groups, principally at the University of Costa Rica, have joined the anti-CAFTA-DR camp under the rubric of a broader anti-globalization ideology. With Pacheco's options for stalling the agreement dwindling and legislative presentation apparently imminent, labor and student unions took to the streets on Tuesday even as Pacheco and his Commission of Eminent Persons made public the results of their two-month study on the trade deal. (Ref B.)

[1](#)3. Given that most observers in Costa Rica anticipated that the Commission's findings would serve as political cover for President Pacheco's eventual movement on the agreement, the protest groups planned their demonstrations to coincide with the public release of the report. In a display of previous coordination, the two groups, which began their protests separately, united in a major traffic intersection near the University of Costa Rica. The solidarity would not last, however, as labor organizers insisted on marching to the Presidential House, while student leaders preferred to remain in front of the university. Both groups continued their protests separately until disbanding in the early afternoon. The marchers were generally well-behaved, and there were no reports of violence or vandalism.

LOCATION, LOCATION...AND TIMING

[1](#)4. In the evening news, however, a group of approximately 60 students staged another protest in one of San Jose's busiest traffic interchanges. The students timed the protest for maximum impact: during evening rush hour in the midst of rain showers. Thus, despite being much smaller in number, this group caused havoc and long delays on several major thoroughfares, in the process stealing some thunder from the morning's larger demonstrations. Police allowed the protesters to remain in the roundabout until they surrendered to the rain at 8:00 PM after committing some mild vandalism against several vehicles.

COMMENT

[1](#)5. President Pacheco has long delayed presenting CAFTA-DR to the Legislative Assembly for fear that labor leaders would be able to make good on their threat to shut down the country through strikes. While the events of September 20 were only the opening round in the anticipated fight, the relatively small impact of these latest protests, viewed especially alongside the disastrous protest attempts in May (Ref C) and increasing support for the treaty in public opinion surveys, ought to mitigate Pacheco's fears of crippling protests.

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